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THE EXTERNALS OF SACRED ART.

BY W. M. ROSSETTI.

THERE is a vast question which Ruskin has mooted—How far Fine Art has, in all or any of the ages of the world, been conducive to the religious life? With his characteristic fairness (or, to adopt the popular critical terminology, in his usual spirit of paradox) he declines in any way to prejudge the question, in accordance to his own sympathies, by pronouncing in favor of Art, and shadows forth the enormous dimensions which the inquiry must assume in order to anything like a satisfactory solution of it.

The foremost branch of this question would of course concern itself with art professedly religious. The decision on that head would govern the decision on the whole question, and would of itself necessitate one of the largest and most intricate historical investigations which any man or body of men could undertake. The thing might perhaps be eventually achieved by the concerted labors of various inquirers, each taking up a distinct period or people; and the result would be of a historic value, and even a present practical importance, such as amply to justify any amount of labor expended in its attainment.

We preface with these remarks the considerations which we purpose offering upon a collateral and very subordinate branch of the great subject, not through any intention of taking part in the larger inquiry, but lest it should be supposed that we are unmindful of that, while our immediate attention is directed to minor points. Our theme is the External of Sacred Art; and the utmost which we propose summarily to consider is, whether the artistic feelings and sympathies of a Protestant people of the nineteenth century are best met by a typical or by a narrative expression of religious subjects; and whether, in the narrative expression, strict accuracy of national type and accessory should be adhered to.

It is to be observed at starting, that although, writing artistically, we do not profess to speak of the religious, but simply of the "artistic feelings and sympathies" engaged in this question, these latter cannot, in point of fact, be trenchantly and absolutely severed from the former. The artistic feelings are only a part of the general tone of mind, and must, in reference to such a subject, involve an exercise of the religious feelings as well. It would be impossible for a believer to be in thorough artistic sympathy with a work which he felt to be an inferior religious expression of a common faith; unless, indeed, his artistic preferences were reduced to the mere question of arrangements of form and color, which is only half of the matter, and the lower half.

Again, the general body of artists of a particular age or country must represent, to a great extent, the tendencies

of that age or country, mental and moral; and if we find among the artists a decided prevalence of feeling towards one form of treatment of an important range of subjects, it will be a strong symptom, so far, that that is the treatment which harmonizes with the public feeling.

Now, we have had within the last two years an opportunity of ascertaining, on a large scale, and untidely, the predominant tendency of the existing schools of art. The Paris Universal Exhibition furnished the opportunity. Its showing may be taken as conclusive; the consentaneous tendency of all the living art of the time is towards naturalism—a more systematic, more downright, and more thorough naturalism than has ever before been sought or professed by art. Naturalism, in connection with sacred art, of course, implies and prescribes a prevalence of direct or narrative over typical representations; and such is actually the case—a well-known section of German artists constituting perhaps the only class which addicts itself, with anything like a systematic impulse, to the typical. Here, then, we have a strong symptom that the narrative form of sacred art is in conformity with the feeling of the time. The symptom, to take it at the lowest, is that of "demand and supply;" but we would rather go a step higher, and say, as before, that the artist, himself a part of the time, abides by that narrative form, of his own accord and preference.

Our special inquiry, however, was as to the light in which the question presents itself to a Protestant people of the nineteenth century. Now, the two most distinctive characteristics of Protestantism may perhaps be defined as the assertion of the right of private judgment (or, more strictly, the irresponsibility for private judgment save to God alone), and reverence for the Bible. These two qualities in combination naturally predispose the mind to receive gladly any conscientious and heartfelt representation of scriptural history, in which the aim is to adhere strictly to the recorded fact, merely transferring it from verbal expression to form, and depending for its impressive enforcement upon the fidelity of the transcript. This neither adds aught to the Bible nor diminishes from it, and makes no sort of demand upon the beholder's private judgment in dependence upon the artist's. The direct Bible narrative is the arbiter appealed to by both; and if the artist shall have ventured in any way to depart from or enlarge upon it, the beholder is in a position, without further ado or misgiving, to reject the addition as extraneous, and lay it at once to the account of the artist. But the case is different with a typical treatment. Here the artist has to select and combine his own symbols. He aims, it may be, at the expression of some religious idea which the beholder is not disposed to receive; or, even if they are at one regarding the idea, he has embodied it under a form, and with a use

of means, for which he is individually responsible. He has asserted in the process his own Protestantism, or right of private judgment; and the more definitely and more originally the assertion is made, the less avenue has he opened for himself towards the convictions and the acceptance of others.

Still further does this show itself to be the fact when we come to consider that it is of Protestants of the *nineteenth century* that we are speaking. The tendencies of the century are—we will not say material, but eminently positive. Men like to see a proposition put into a concrete form, and to have a truth enforced rather by example than by precept. Dogmatic subtleties and the theology of the schoolmen exercise comparatively little influence; religion is considered more a matter of conduct and of the inner life than a thing expressible in a formula or a proposition. We are far from hazarding an assertion so bold, and so much beyond our present scope, as that there is more of vital religion in the present age than in time past; what we have limited ourselves to saying is, that the religious life, where one finds it, is less sure than of old to unite outward form and observance with the worship in spirit and in truth. This positivism and this unformalism enhance the alienation from a typical presentment of religious subject. The motto of the practical man, "Facts and Figures," may be made to serve his turn as well for pictures as for blue-books; but he is as far from understanding the "figures" to mean a *figurative rendering* in the one as *figures of speech* in the other. Indeed, we may put it to the suffrage of most readers whether they are not themselves cold to typical art of the present day, and whether they know, unless as exceptional cases, any persons who are the reverse.

It is to be carefully noted, however, in qualification of the general conclusion towards which we are tending, that these exceptional cases will mainly be the persons who most intensely dwell upon and feel religious art, whether typical or narrative, and that *they* will be apt to delight as much in the first as in the second. And further, that the coldness of the mass of men is due partly to the hastiness of the age, which will not give itself time to think out the meaning of the types presented, and partly to the fact that typical art, in its present decadence, has ceased to form any broadly considered and recognizable system. But this fact is itself an element of Protestantism; it has broken from tradition, and asserts the individual.

Here, then, we may quit this first section of our inquiry, concluding that the artist of our day, who works with the aim of impressing the mass of his contemporaries—who seeks to "leave the whole lump"—will find it his wisdom to leave the type, and hold to the direct fact; to understand a narrative, and translate it into form, rather than to symbolize a conception for translation by others.

The second section of our inquiry is, Whether in the narrative form of sacred art, strict accuracy of national type and accessory should be adhered to. Is our Madonna to be a Jewess, our biblical costume oriental, our scenery that

of the Holy Land? The question presents itself under two several aspects; firstly, as it affects the artists whom we may call for the nonce, and for the sake of brevity, "traditionalists;" and secondly, as it affects the naturalists.

Before proceeding, however, to consider the case so far in detail, we must lay down the broad principle that sacred art has utterly failed, unless it produces a sacred impression; that it must be attempted in that conviction, and with that object only; and that no question of literal truth, in ethnology, chronology, costume, or what not, has any business to be so much as taken into account except as wholly subordinate and conducive to the sacred impression. If the most absolute falsification of these subordinates is the safe means to that impression, falsify to your heart's content; only, do not falsify in mere sluggishness of heart and brain, in order that you may just "follow your leader." What we have to inquire is whether falsification *is* the means.

The model of the traditionalist is Raffaele, in such compositions as the cartoons. The traditionalist dresses his figures in blankets which were never worn, puts a bit of Judaism here for the "characteristic" heads, a bit of Anglicism there (supposing him to be a Briton), a bit of classicism, and an entirety of nothingism. His whole composition becomes a subject such as never could have happened, and which does not even ask to be genuinely credited. We have before declared our conviction, and given reasons for it, that a professed fact must be *like* a fact, and that the artist, after availing himself of every aid for strengthening and vivifying his conception of the subject, must represent its visible embodying form as that is or was. We can therefore have no hesitation in pronouncing that the traditionalist entirely misses his mark as regards the means. In that respect the whole thing is dead, and worse than useless. He is neither true to any vital conception of the fact, nor true to Judaism, nor to Anglicism, nor useful, even were he true, to classicism. His means command no sympathy, and awaken no associations, save of the artistic (not to say artificial) kind. We do not say that they command no respect, only no sympathy. It is but too true that the great body of the public, unused to anything more real or more significant, come prepared for the traditional treatment, and are rather put out by any other; they repeat to themselves, from mouth to mouth, that the former "must be all right," and fancy that such is their own opinion. Still less do we say that the traditionalist is absolutely precluded, by his use of means, from producing a work having some savor of vitality. He may be a man of genius or of intense feeling, and no means can obstruct him; but those means do mournfully obstruct even such a man, and deaden to an unascertained but too certain extent the energies and aspirations of hundreds of others. So much, then, for the traditionalist; the worst we wish him is that he may soon become a tradition.

The naturalist has no model except nature; but he has a choice, and in each of its alternatives a prototype. It is

on something actually seen in nature that he bases himself, and he has to decide whether he will abide unreservedly by the nature of his own time and clime, or whether he will aim at realizing his subject according to the authentic details properly belonging to that.

The prototypes for the former principle are of course the schools of pre-Raphaelite art, which made their scriptural personages, from *anno mundi* to *anno domini*, Florentines of the thirteenth, Frenchmen of the fourteenth, Flemings or Venetians of the fifteenth century, according simply to the artist's own circumstances. The result was a living Art. The artist thoroughly felt the reality of his subject, and realized it thoroughly to others.

A distinguished writer, who has the habit of following out his principles always to their ultimate results, is understood to have implied in his writings, and to have expressly declared by word of mouth, that this is the *only* admissible form of treatment; and that the British nineteenth century must not hope to have a living sacred art until, acting out the same principle to the uttermost, it shall dress its apostles in coats and trowsers, and its centurions in the uniform of the —th regiment. The sapient public grins consumedly at such strange doctrine. We shall not swell the cachinnation, because we recognize that there is a truth at the bottom of the axiom. The premises we believe to be sound, viz., that the sacred art in which that principle was adopted is the truest we have yet seen, and that there is always some insincerity, some truckling, or some compromise in the art which seeks to throw itself out of its own period. But we entirely dissent from the extreme conclusion, and shall briefly state some reasons for the dissent.

The motive is everything, the form comparatively nothing. The mediæval artist worked wholly without *arrière pensée*. Very possibly, to many, it never so much as occurred that the men whom they painted had dressed differently, and lived under different conditions; and, even if it did, the artist neither knew nor cared what the difference verily amounted to. *Now* the case is quite the reverse. It would not be an act of good faith, but the opposite, for the artist to paint St. Peter's costume from a Newhaven fisherman's, or St. Joseph's from that of his easel maker. The learning of the age may be a benefit to its art, or a misfortune; but it is a fact, and cannot be ignored. And the whole question of costume and accessory may be a very unimportant one, in comparison with the life-blood of the subject (for this just consideration has much to do with the position we are combating); but *some* costume and accessory there must be, and some exercise of discretion in the painting of them.

The position appears still less tenable from the paramount point of view of what the effect of the work of art shall be on the spectator. If the mediæval artist murdered chronology with a complacent conscience—and we fully recognize that he was right in doing so—the mediæval spectator had still less feeling of foul play; the modern

spectator, on the contrary, would hold his nose at the corpse. Or to leave our metaphor, the modern spectator would be so offended at the anachronism as to be seriously impeded, if not wholly stopped, from estimating aright the essentials of the subject across the inaccuracy of its details. This again might be right or wrong, and would assuredly be wrong in a great measure; but it places the question on a wholly different ground, and is to our judgment conclusive against the notion of such a treatment.

For the opposite form of naturalistic treatment—that which approaches as near as possible to the veritable reality of detail—the prototype is the art of Vernet and his followers, who have painted a number of biblical subjects as true studies of Arabian, Egyptian, or Hebrew life. These men mostly miss religious feeling and conception, but as far as the form goes, they are a sufficient prototype; and we hope soon to see works of similar form and noble spirit. The principle of the naturalistic artist binds him to take the closest accessible natural models. He is not required to reject a great range of subjects merely because he cannot realize them absolutely from the fact; and, if his opportunities allow of nothing else, he will be true to his principle in representing the nature of his own country with such resources of costume and accessory as he may find available from study and research, and which may preserve his work from an incongruity palpable and distasteful to the ordinary spectator. If, on the other hand, he has the opportunity of coming closer to the reality—and the closest possible is the life and the scenery and detail of the biblical regions at the present day—his principle will prescribe these as his material. However, there is an important limitation to their use. It still remains for the artist to consider and ascertain whether he is thoroughly in sympathy with the alien nature. If he can only use its details, without fully assimilating its character and essence, if he can but copy with the hand, and apply with the rational faculty, the palm tree and the desert sand, the bronze face, the majestic robes, and the eastern gravity, while his seeing eye and his understanding heart are still for English nature, and that only, the truer naturalism is to stand fast by that. For otherwise, he will but be using the naturalism of detail, and missing the naturalism of essence, which is no better than pseudo-naturalism; and the conflict of the two will inevitably be stamped with incongruity, which is anti-naturalism downright.

This difficulty is weighty, but we do not believe it insurmountable. We believe, on the contrary, that a great imaginative naturalist will, in the present day, seek for the very reality of his sacred theme with genuine devotion to truth, and love of its power; and that, diligently husbanding his faculties, he will, with this devotion and this love, enter into the reality in spirit as well as form, and show at once the facts to our eyes, and the substance and meaning to our souls.

This we believe to be the highest ideal of sacred art for the day wherein we live; to be unattempted by most men,

striven for by a few, and, when attained with labor and longing, most precious.

"Wisdom is justified of her children." We repeat, that the great artist may produce a great work of sacred art, whether his method be traditionalist, naturalist, or according to his own national associations, or according to those of the real scene itself; but that the first method, the traditional, is, of its proper nature, a trammel to the artist; the second, if pushed to extremes, an offence, whether rightly or wrongly, to the "wisdom" of the age—if adopted in a modified form, a noble but minor degree of truth; the third, hardly to be grappled with, the highest and most noble truth when mastered.

CARLYLE.

THE two great Highland Thomases—Macaulay and Carlyle—are the last and best gifts of Scotland to England. Both possess those powers of imagination which flourish in the bracing mountain air of Scotland better than on the level plains of England. The English language, however, accustomed to thrive upon plain fare, seems almost too lean for the luxurious dishes of these Scottish epicureans. This is emphatically the case with the volcanic seer of Nithsdale. See him beginning his career, dashing down from his shaggy Highland heath, with curling lips and frowning brow, pouncing upon England with a fury and an impetuosity equal to that which animated the Guards who brought relief to Lucknow. See him, the stalwart son of a sturdy Scotch lass, hurling fire and flame in all directions, attacking single-handed the Gibraltar of social corruption; striving with Titan's power and Richter's thought to annihilate mediæval prejudice, to burn up the old rubbish, and to clear the way again for purer Christian thought. See him tearing to atoms terms, and things, and persons which have no meaning; and Moses-like, beating the rock of old words to yield new ideas. Gallant Scotch intellect! But, alas! poor Thomas, you must be patient with this slow-moving, wicked world! Go and ask some of your brave countrymen whether they did not find it easier to overcome the savage Sepoys than the prejudices of some of their civilized comrades. But he is like the unbelieving incredulous Thomas of olden times. He won't stop to listen. His blood is up, and off he dashes into the thick of the fight, with thoughts flashing like soldier's bayonets in mountain defiles. Oh, the wild, bold, daring man! Seated upon a proud, high-bred steed, he rushes along over fences and walls, almost like a drunkard, as if his German idality had succumbed under the influence of Scotch whisky, but rushing along with method in his madness; indifferent to the beauties of Hellas, unimpressed with the grandeur of Rome, unmoved with the pathos of Calvary; trampling upon the silly crusaders and besotted minstrels; thundering along like a Calvinist camp-preacher in search of Catholic harlotry. At length a terrible crash shakes the earth. He hears a shriek of dismay. Blood

covers the globe as far as the eye can reach. Where once stood cottages blessed with happiness, scaffolds are now reeking with murder. Gentlemen are stripped of their fine clothes, scholars of their fine learning, priests of their holy robes. Weak men, brutalized by the selfishness of strong men, wreak their revenge by wholesale butcheries. The women of the Halle coquet with the guillotine, and when the terrible revel is over, a pale, but broad shouldered man is seen to haunt the battle-field, chuckling with fierce delight, like "a snuffy philosopher upon the watch." He takes the blood and the rest of the ingredients thrown into this caldron by the Fates, to his studio in Chelsea thus riding home laden with the horrors of the 18th century, and with far more boisterous glee than ever thrilled the weird sisters that sung over it their incantation song.

The 18th century is to Carlyle what the Whigs are to Macaulay. Both, imaginative as they are, proclaim their national proclivities by a shrewd selection of a strong basis. Macaulay's Adam is the first Whig, and Carlyle's Genesis begins with the French Revolution. Historians, in the highest sense, they are not, because the true historian, as Carlyle remarks in the opening pages of his Frederick, puts himself in harmony with the laws of the universe, and begins with the beginning. Neither of them belong to this class of harmonious historians, which, as Carlyle justly remarks, has not yet dawned upon the world. Neither Carlyle nor Macaulay begin with the beginning; but with that part which suits best their literary genius and their temperament. One selects the Whig revolution, in obedience to political predilections; the other chooses the guillotine dispensation as most convenient for giving vent to semi-grand, semi-grandiloquent thought. The one, apparently conservative, but in reality a demagogue, is kindled into eloquence and brilliancy by the heat of political warfare and the flow of dramatic incident. The other, reformatory in his aspirations, but unable to see beyond the gloom of a shadow, is attracted to the catacombs of revolutions, like the vulture to abandoned carcases. Carlyle should have been a warrior; but the age is evidently not calculated to give to an energetic man like Carlyle a suitable place in the strong world of action. In the feeble world of letters he winces; we behold a vigorous man seeking a relief there, which action alone can supply. Carlyle's words may not even disturb the mice of Nithsdale; but from the moment they began to take effect, he would himself be the first to cry out against the result, and be utterly disgusted with the hideous freaks and pranks which the first process of the crystallization of his ideas into action would be likely to produce.

Rousseau was, in some measure, in his time to France what Carlyle is now to England, and probably Rousseau would have been rather startled if he had seen the logical flesh and blood connection between his ideas and the guillotine. Carlyle, planting his battery upon the platform of the guillotine where the Frenchman left it, is not much more keen-sighted than his predecessor, although his nose